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Ancient History Sourcebook
Sophocles:
Antigone (excerpts)

[The crime] [The defense] [Who is punished?]
Antigone, by the greatest of all Sophocles, is about conflicting duties. The heroine Antigone has defied her uncle Creon's edict and buried her rebellious brother. Here, Creon, concerned with the safety of the state, learns of the crime and confronts Antigone, who places family duty above everything.

The Crime
CREON
Why is my presence timely? What has chanced?

GUARD
No man, my lord, should make a vow, for if he ever swears he will not do a thing, His afterthoughts belie his first resolve. When from the hail-storm of thy threats I fled I swore thou wouldst not see me here again; But the wild rapture of a glad surprise Intoxicates, and so I'm here forsworn.

CREON
And here's my prisoner, caught in the very act, Defying the grave. Not long will it remain: This prize is mine by right of treasure-love. So take her, judge her, rack her, if thou wilt. She's mortal; I have no right to spare her life. Hence to depart well quit of all these ills.

CREON
Say, how didst thou arrest the maid, and where?
GUARD
Burying the man. There's nothing more to tell.

CREON
Hast thou thy wife? Or know'st thou what thou say'st?
GUARD
I saw this woman burying the corpse Against thy orders. Is that clear and plain?

CREON
How was she surprised and caught in the act?
GUARD
It happened thus. No sooner had we come, Driven from thy presence by those awful threats, Than straight we swept away all trace of dust, And raised the clammy body. Then we sat High on the ridge to windward of the chench, Watching the grave. Not long it was ere I saw Roundly the sluggard if he stand to nap. So all night long we watched, until the sun Shook his heaven, and his rightly steams Smote us. A sudden whirlwind then upraised A cloud of dust that blotted out the sky, And swept the plain, and slugged the woodlands bare. And shook the firmament. We closed our eyes And waited till the heaven-sent plague should pass. All that I needed, and to let me stoop this maid. A piercing cry she uttered, and who said, As when the mother bird beholds her nest Rugged of its nestlings, even so the maid Is hatched! I am woman, she and mine, And cursed the ruffians who had done this deed. Arise she gathered handfuls of dry dust. Then, bidding high a wail, I caught her arm. Twice on the dead she poured a lateral stream. We at the sight swooped down on her and seized Each an ironed staff to smother down the deed. We taxed her with the former crime and this. She disowned nothing. I was glad--and grieved; For his most sweetest I scarce esteem a scold-free. And yet to bring disaster to a friend Is grievous. Take it all in all, I deem A man's first duty is to serve himself.

CREON
I should have been none so dumb as thou. Does thou plead guilty or deny the deed?
ANTIGONE
Guilty. I did it. I deny I not.

CREON (to GUARD)
Sirrah, begone whither thou wilt, and thank Thy luck that thou hast 'scaped a heavy charge. (To ANTIGONE)
Now answer this plain question, yea or no. Wast thou acquainted with the interdict?

ANTIGONE
I knew, all knew; how should I fail to know?
CREON
And yet wert't bold enough to break the law?

ANTIGONE
Yes, for these laws were not ordained of Zeus, And she who sits enthroned with gods below. Justice, unswayed, is the law's eldest friend. Nor did I deem that thou, a mortal man, Couldst by a breath annul and oversteer The immutable unmeted laws of Heaven. They were not born today nor yesterday; They die not, and none knoweth whence they sprang. Certain to the doom of all, they stand, and own, To disobey these laws and so provoke The wrath of Heaven. I knew that I must die. E'er hadst thou not proclaimed it and I death Is there's beset me, I shall court it gain. For death is gain to him whose life, like mine, Is full of misery. Thus my lot appears Not sad, but blissful, for I feel I endure it. To leave my mother's son unburied there, I should have grieved with reason, but not now. And if in this I judge me a fool, Methinks the judge of folly's not acquit.

CHORUS
A stubborn daughter of a stubborn sire. This ill-starred maiden kicks against the pricks. Well, let her know the stubbornest of wills Sooner bends to the will of heaven than not. O'er-healed in the fire to bitterness, Files soonest into fragments, shivered through. A sin that, unrepented, is the worst of woes. Who in subjecting lives must needs be meek. But this proud girl, in inscience well-schooled, First overstepped the established law, and then-- A second and worse act of inscience-- She boasts and glories in her wickedness. Now if she thus can find authority, I might as well advise her to be a man. But though she be my sister's child or nearer Of kin than all who worship at my hearth, Nor can I spare her, nor my sister's escape The utmost penalty, for both I hold, As arch-conspirators, of equal guilt. Bring forth the sister, even now I will her. Within the palace, frenzied and distraught, The workings of the mind discover oft Dark and evil darknesses almost to the act. More hateful still the mischief who seeks When caught, to make a virtue of a crime.

ANTIGONE
Wouldst thou do more than slay thy prisoner?
CREON
Not 'thy life is mine, and that's enough.

ANTIGONE
Why dally then? To me no word of thine Is pleasant. God forbid it'er should please; Nor am I more acceptable to thee. And yet how otherwise had I achieved A name so glorious as by burying A brother? I am woman, she and mine, Where they not gagged by terror, Manhood A king's prerogatives, and not the least. Thus I maintain an law before a law.

CREON
Grief and rage The ban none so deems out thou.
ANTIGONE
These trifles as I, but bates their breath to thee.

CREON
Hast thou no shame to differ from all these?
ANTIGONE
To reverence him and kin can bring no shame.

CREON
Was his dead foe than not thy kinsman too?

ANTIGONE
One mother bare them and the self-same sire.

CREON
Why cast a slur on one by honoring one?

ANTIGONE
The dead man will not bear thee out in this.

CREON
Surely, if good and evil fare alike.

ANTIGONE
The slain man was no villain but a brother.

CREON
The patriot perished by the outlaw's brand.

ANTIGONE
Nathless the realms below these rites require.

CREON
Not that the base should fare as do the brave.

ANTIGONE
Who knows if this world's crimes are virtues there?

CREON
Not even death can make a foe a friend.

ANTIGONE
My nature is for mutual love, not hate.

CREON
Die then, and love the dead if thou must; No woman shall be the master while I live.

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The Defense: Creon's son, Haemon, who is engaged to Antigone, attempts to defend her actions to his father

What, would you have us at our age be schooled, Lashed in prudence by a beardless boy?

HAEMON
I plead for justice, father, nothing more. Weigh me upon my merit, not my years.

CREON
Strange merit this to sanction lawlessness!
HAEMON
Forbear, fathers! I would urge no plea.

CREON
Is not this maid an arrant law-breaker?
HAEMON
The Theban commons with one voice say, No.

CREON
What, shall the mob dictate my policy?
HAEMON
'Tis thou, methinks, who speakest like a boy.

CREON
Am I to rule for others, or myself?
HAEMON
Am I to rule for others, or myself?
HAEMON
A state for one man is no State at all.

CREON
The State is his who rules it, so 'tis held.
HAEMON
As monarch of a desert thou wouldst shine.

CREON
This boy, methinks, maintains the woman's cause.
HAEMON
I know'st woman, yes. My thought's for thee.

CREON
O reprobate, would'st wrangle with thy sire?
HAEMON
Because I see thee wrongfully perverse.

CREON
And am I wrong, if I maintain my rights?
HAEMON
This not of rights; thou spurn'st the due of Heaven

CREON
O heart corrupt, a woman's minion thou!
HAEMON
Slave to dishonor thou wilt never find me.

CREON
Thy speech at least was all a plea for her.
HAEMON
And thee and me, and for the gods below.

CREON
Living the maid shall never be thy bride.
HAEMON
So she shall die, but one will die with her.

CREON
Hast come to such a pass as threaten me?
HAEMON
What threat is this, vain counsels to reprove?

CREON
Vain fool to instruct thy betters; thou shalt rue it.
HAEMON
Wert not my father, I had said thou err'st.

CREON
Play not the spaniel, thou a woman's slave.
HAEMON
When thou dost speak, must no man make reply?

CREON
This passes bounds. By Heaven, thou shalt not rate And yet and thou me with impunity. Off with the hateful thing that she may die At once, beside her bridegroom, in his sight.

HAEMON
Think not that in my sight the maid shall die, Or by my side; never shalt thou again Behold my face hereafter. Go, consort With thy kindred; I am gone, and never shall I see thee more. [Exit HAEMON]

Who is Punished? As the seer Teiresias warns Creon of the consequences of his inflexibility, the ruler reflects, but it is too late.

TEIRESIAS
Know when for sure, the courses of the sun Nor many times shall run their oars, before Thou shalt have given the fruit of thine own loins In quittance of thy murder, life for life: For that thou hast entombed a living soul, And seest the saddest denizen of earth, And wronged the nether gods by leaving her A corpse unclaved, unwept, uncolchered. Herein thou hast no part, nor e'en the gods. In heart we find thee unrepentant, a power not thine. For this the avenging spirits of Heaven and Hell Who dog the steps of sin are on thy trail: What these have suffered thou shalt suffer too. And now, consider whether bought by gold I prophesy. For, yet a little while, And sound of lamentation shall be heard, Of men and women through thy desolate halls; And all thy Theban Sittes see to avenge I' the maw of wolf or bound, or winged bird That flying homewards taints their city's air. These are the shafts, that like a bowman I Press to forth, my arrows, lo! thy father's sinners. Unerring, and their smart thou shalt not slun. Boy, lead me home, that he may vent his spleen On younger men, and learn to curb his tongue With fierce and numerous blows his present doom. [Exit TEIRESIAS]

CHORUS
My liege, that man hath gone, foretelling woe. Ah! O believe me, since these rattled locks Were like the raven, never have I known The prophet's warning to the State to fail.

CREON
I know it too, and it perplexes me. To yield is grievous, but the obstinate soul That fights with Fate, is smitten grievously.

CHORUS
Son of Menoecus, list to good advice. What should I do. Advise me. I will heed.

CHORUS
Go, free the maiden from her rocky cell; And for the unburied outlaw build a tomb.

CREON
Is that your counsel? You would have me yield?
CHORUS
Yes, king, this instant. Vengeance of the gods Is swift to overtake the impenitent.

CREON
Ah! what a wrench it is to sacrifice My heart's resolve; but Fate is fit to fight.

CHORUS
Go, trust not others. Do it quick thyself.

CREON
I go for-foot. Bestir ye one and all, My henchmen! Get ye axes! Spread away To yonder eminence! I too will go, For all my resolution is thy sways. 'Twas I that bound, I too will see her free. How long I am perplexed it is the best To keep through life the law ordained of aid. [Exit CREON]

CHORUS
(Str. 1)
Thou by many names adored, Child of Zeus the God of thunder, Of a Theban bride the wonder, Fair Iulia's guardian lord;

In the deep-embosomed glades Of the Eleusian Queen Hunt of ewers, men and maids, Dionysus, thou art seen.

Where Ixion's rolls his waters, Where the Dragon's hoar and charged the state sapsme, Where the Bacchantals thy daughters Round thee roam, There thy home; Thebes, O Bacchus, is thine own.

(Ant. 1)
Thee on the two-crested rock Lurid-flaming torches see to blaze, Where Christian maidens flock, Thee the springs of Castaly.

By Nysa's bastion ivy-clad, By shores with clustered vineyards glad, There to thee the hymn rings out, And through our streets we Thebans shout, All hail to thee Evoe, Evoe!

(Str. 2)
Oh, as thou lov'st this city best of all, To thee, and to thy Mother Ixion-stricken, In our dire need we call; Thou see'st with what a plague our townfolk sicken. Thy ready help we crave, Whether aion Parrhasian heights descending, Or 'er the roaring straits thy swift was winding, Save us, O save!

(Ant. 2)
Brightest of all the orbs that breathe forth light, Authentic son of Zeus, immortal King, Leader of all the voices of the night, Come, and thy train of Thyiads with thee bring, Thy maidens' robes in public to display; Who dance before thee all night long, and shout, Thy handmaids we, Evoe, Evoe!

[Enter MESSENGER]
MESSENGER
Attend all ye who dwell beside the halls Of Cadmus and Amphion. No man's life As of one tenor would I praise or blame, For Fortune with a constant ebb and rise Casts down and raises high and low alike, And none can read a mortal's life to scope. Take Creon; he, methought, if any man, Was enviable. He had saved this land Of Cadmus from our enemies and attained A monarch's powers and ruled the state supreme, While a right noble issue crowned his bliss. Now all is gone and wasted, for a life Without life's joys I count a living death. Do I feel me thus ampie store of wealth, The jump and circum of kings, but if These give no pleasure, nor would I weigh His wealth and power 'gainst a dram of joy.

CHORUS
What fresh woes bring'st thou to the royal house?
MESSENGER
Both dead, and they who live deserve to die.

CHORUS
Who is the slayer, who the victim? speak.
MESSENGER
Haemon; his blood shed by no stranger hand.

CHORUS
What mean ye? by his father's or his own?
MESSENGER
Thes wife; to avenge for his father's crime.

CHORUS
O prophet, what thou spakest comes to pass.
MESSENGER
So stands the case; now 'tis for you to act.

CHORUS
Lo! from the palace gates I see approaching Creon's unhappy wife, Eurydice. Comes she by chance or learning her son's fate? [Enter EURYDICE]
EURYDICE
Ye men of Thebes, I overheard your talk. As I passed out to offer up my prayer To Pallas, and was drawing back the bar To open wide the door, upon my eyes Stricken with terror in my handmaids' arms I fell as if I aimed, but repeat your tale To one not unacquaint with misery.

MESSENGER
Dear mistress, I was there and will relate The misery, but, omitting not one word, Why should we grieve and flatter, to be proved Liars hereafter? Truth is ever best. Well, in attendance on my liege, your lord, I crossed the plain to its utmost margin, where The corpse of Polyneices, gnawn and maul'd, Was lying yet. We offered first a prayer To Pluto and the goddess of cross-ways, With contrite hearts, to appease their ire. Then leved with lustral waters the mangled corpse, Laid it on fresh-lopped branches, lit a pyre, And to his memory piled a mighty mound Of mother earth. Then to the covered rock, The bridal chamber of the maid and Death, We sped, about to enter. But a guard Heard from that goddess shrine a far shrill wail, And ran back to our lord to tell the news. But as he near'd, a hollow sound Of lamentation to the King was borne. He groaned and uttered then this bitter plaint: 'Am I a prophet? miserable me! Is this the saddest part I ever met?' 'Tis my son's voice that calls me. On press on, My henchmen, haste with double speed to the tomb Where rocks down-torn have made a gap, look in And tell me if in truth I receive my tale. The voice of Haemon or am heaven-deceived.' So at the bidding of our distraught lord We looked, and in the craven's vaulted gloom I saw the maiden lying straggled there, A noose of linen twined about her neck; And hard beside her, clasping her cold form, Her lover lay bewailing his dead bride. Death-wreath, and his father's cruelty. When the King saw him, with a terrible groan He moved towards him, crying, 'O my son What hast thou done? What ailed thee? What mischief Has reft thee of thy reason? O come forth, Come forth, my son; speak thy supplicates.' But the son glared at him with tiger eyes, Spat in his face, and then, without a word, Drove his two-blited sword and smote, but missed His father flying backwards. Then the boy Writh with himself, poor wretch, incontinent Fell on his sword and drove it through his side Home, but yet breathing clasped in his lax arms The maid, her pallid cheeks, incarnadined With his expiring gasps. So there they lay Two corpses, one in death. His marriage rites Are consummated in the halls of Death: A witness that of this whate'er befall. Mourn! 'tis unwise, the worst of all. [Exit EURYDICE]

CHORUS
What news dost thou of this? The Queen has gone Without a word importing good or ill.
MESSENGER
I marvel no, but entering public hope. 'Tis that she shrinks in grief to lament Her son's sad ending, and in privacy Would with her maidens mourn a private loss. Trust me, she is discreet and will not err.

CHORUS
I know not, but strained excessive, so I deem, Is no less ominous than silence grief.

MESSENGER
Well, let us to the house and solve our doubts, Whether the tumult of her heart conceals Some ill design, or if she be thou art right; Unnatural silence signifies no good.

CHORUS
Lo! the King himself appears. Evidence he with him bears 'Gainst himself (ah me! I quake 'Gainst a king such charge to make) But all mass own, The guilt is his and his alone.

CREON
(Str. 1)
Woe for sin of minds perversive, Deadly fraught with mortal curse, Behold us slain and slayers, all akin. Woe for my counsel dire, conceived in sin. Alas, my son, Life scarce begun, Thou wast undone. The fault was mine, mine only, O my son!

CHORUS
Too late thou seemest to desire the truth.

CREON
(Str. 2)
By sorrow schooled, Heavy the hand of God, Thorny and rough the paths my feet have trod, Humbled my pride, my pleasure turned to pain; Poor mortal, how we labor all in vain! [Enter SECOND MESSENGER]
SECOND MESSENGER
Hearing the loud lament above her son With her own hand she stabbed herself to the heart.

CREON
(Str. 4)
Lain the guilty cause, I did the deed, Thy wife, the mother of thy dead son here, Eas surely by avenge unjusticed woe.

CREON
(Ant. 1)
How hast thou met the girl? Does claim me too, O Death? What is this word he saith, This woeful messenger? Say, is it fit To stay and we may straightway slay? Is Death to work again? Stroke upon stroke, first son, then mother slain?

CHORUS
Look for thyself. She lies for all to view.

CREON
(Ant. 2)
Alas! I meet her colder woe I see, What more remains to crown my agony? A minute past I clasped a lifeless son, And now another victim Death hath won. Unhappy mother, most unhappy son!

SECOND MESSENGER
Beside the altar on a keen-edged sword She laid her hand, and then with her first Stroke she cut for Megareus who newly died Long since, then for her son; with her last breath She cursed thee, the slayer of her child.

CREON
(Str. 3)
I shudder with affright O for a two-edged sword to slay outright A wretch like mine, who feeds the heavy weight Of cursed sin.

SECOND MESSENGER
'Tis woman's powers and ruled the state supreme, As author of both deaths, hers and her son's.

CREON
In what wise was her self-destruction wrought?

SECOND MESSENGER
Hearing the loud lament above her son With her own hand she stabbed herself to the heart.

CREON
(Str. 4)
Lain the guilty cause, I did the deed, Thy wife, the mother of thy dead son here, Eas surely by avenge unjusticed woe.

CHORUS
(Ant. 3)
Come, Fate, a friend at need, Come with all speed! Come, my best friend, Away, away! Let me not look upon another day!

CHORUS
This for the marrow; to us are present needs That they whom it concerns must take in hand.

CREON
I join your prayer that echoes my desire.

CHORUS
O pray not, prayers are idle; from the doom Of fate for mortals refuge is there none.

CREON
(Ant. 4)
Away with me, a worthless wretch who slay Unwitting thee, my son, thy mother too. Whither to turn I know now; every way Leads but astray, And I am left to feel the heavy weight Of cursed sin.

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